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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, RI**

**MANAGING PERCEPTION: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IMPERATIVE**

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**A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

**13 February 2005**

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We have compelled every land and every sea to open a path for our valor; and we have everywhere planted eternal memorials of our friendship and our enmity.

Thucydides

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## **ABSTRACT**

The “Global War on Terrorism” (GWOT) has—at its core—a requirement for persuasion. The GWOT represents less a conflict against an old and proliferated tactic than a fundamental war of ideas, waged largely through regional insurgencies and fought for hearts and minds. The United States will not win this war with kinetics alone. Across this ideological divide, information, and how it is presented, has assumed a critical role as a dimension of the modern battlefield and a weapon to wield across the spectrum of conflict. In this modern fight, victory hinges largely on perception. U.S. operational commanders, extremely proficient in the application of kinetic, or “hard power,” must increasingly understand and incorporate the non-kinetic elements of “soft power” to wage successful counterinsurgency warfare on information-laden, non-kinetic, twenty-first century battlefields. This paper examines the fight for perception on an evolving battlefield, analyzes this battlefield using the operational factors of space, time, and force, and concludes by offering operational commanders recommendations to fight and win the critical war of ideas.

## INTRODUCTION

It [public perception] has changed things just enormously and we clearly have to pay attention to it. The conflict we're in is not against a big army or big navy or big air force. The United States military is not going to lose a single war or battle or skirmish over in Iraq or Afghanistan. The competition, the battle that's taking place is for people's minds.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

The "Global War on Terrorism" (GWOT) has—at its core—a requirement for persuasion. In his November 2005 "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," President Bush framed the struggle as a "long war against the ideology that breeds international terrorism."<sup>1</sup> Across the ideological battlefield, senior al-Qaida strategist Ayman al-Zawahiri offered Musab al-Zarqawi and his Jihadists in Iraq this advice: "I say to you that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place on the battlefield of the media. . . . We are in a . . . race for the hearts and minds of our Umma [people]."<sup>2</sup> This race for hearts and minds hinges on perception.

Across this ideological divide, information, and how it is presented, has assumed a critical role as a dimension of the modern battlefield and a weapon to be wielded across the spectrum of conflict. The searing imagery of 9/11 provides ample proof. As has long been asserted, information is power. In the "Information Age," where information is transmitted with global reach and unprecedented speed, the military and informational instruments of national power are increasingly merging on the modern battlefield. Doctrinally positioned between strategic intent and tactical reality, this nexus converges at the operational level of war. "With the pace of technology and . . . the nature of the GWOT," Department of Defense (DoD) official Ryan Henry asserts, "information has become much more a part of strategic victory, and to a certain extent tactical victory, than it ever was in the past."<sup>3</sup> Linking those victories requires operational commanders to understand and apply the power of information.

In his book *Soft Power*, author Joseph Nye describes “hard power” as the use of military and economic strength to compel desired outcomes, and “soft power” as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion. He concludes that the United States must employ “smart power,” a combination of both, to prevail in the war against terror.<sup>4</sup>

The thesis of this paper is that U.S. operational commanders, extremely proficient in the application of hard power, must increasingly understand and incorporate the non-kinetic elements of soft power to wage successful counterinsurgency warfare on twenty-first century battlefields. Winning the GWOT involves more than overwhelming force and decisive attack, a conclusion our enemy has reached from necessity. To prevail, U.S. military forces must harness information to wage a compelling war of ideas. We need smart power. In order to link strategic and tactical victory, U.S. operational commanders must adapt to this non-kinetic battlefield, and seize the initiative to defeat an adept enemy, seeking to outmaneuver us in the fight for the “hearts and minds of our Umma.”<sup>5</sup> As former House Speaker Newt Gingrich has suggested, “The real key is not how many enemy do I kill. The real key is how many allies do I grow.”<sup>6</sup>

This paper argues that perception is a viable and necessary objective at the operational level of war, drawing evidence from the U.S. counterinsurgency experience in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). The ability to pursue this objective is constrained by a lack of understanding, training, and forces to conduct persuasive Information Operations (IO), a weakness our enemy is exploiting. The intent of this paper is not to dissect IO doctrine, explore the computer-related aspects of IO, or assess the many organizations with “information” in their titles. The focus of this paper is to examine the fight for perception on an evolving battlefield, analyze this battlefield using the operational factors of space, time, and force, and conclude by offering recommendations for operational commanders to engage in the critical war of ideas.

## A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

We have to be really careful about the mindsets we create.

GEN Anthony Zinni

On November 30, 2005, revelations regarding an initiative by Multi-National Force, Iraq (MNF-I) staff officers to influence Iraqi perceptions rang alarm bells throughout the corridors of power in Washington. The *LA Times* broke a story describing how MNF-I IO planners and DoD contractors from the “Lincoln Group,” a “strategic communications” firm, paid Baghdad newspapers to “plant” “storyboards”—positive portrayals of MNF-I operations authored by Americans for Iraqi consumption—without attribution, an apparent violation of DoD policy.<sup>7</sup>

The story raised questions of truth, propaganda, and perception that immediately clouded the linkage of operational objective and strategic intent. On December 4, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley told a national television audience, “the president was very disturbed about those reports,” elaborating, “one of the reasons we are in Iraq is to help the Iraqis establish the institutions of democracy and freedom, and one of those, of course, is a free press and a free media.”<sup>8</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner trekked to the Pentagon, demanding an explanation. Following the briefing, he voiced “concern about any actions that could undermine the credibility of the United States as we help the Iraqi people stand up a democracy,”<sup>9</sup> but added, “Things like this happen—it’s a war. The disinformation that’s going on in that country is really affecting the effectiveness of what we’re achieving, and we have no recourse but to try and do some rebuttal information.”<sup>10</sup> In a separate interview, General Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), stated: “We want to get the facts out. We want to get the truth out,”<sup>11</sup> but qualified his remarks, saying, “Anything that would be detrimental to the proper functioning of a democracy in Iraq would worry me.”<sup>12</sup>



MNF-I spokesman Major General Rick Lynch attempted to allay these concerns, explaining: “We don’t lie. We don’t need to lie. We do empower our operational commanders with the ability to inform the Iraqi public, but everything we do is based on fact, not based on fiction.”<sup>13</sup> Critics remained unmoved, decrying the affair as a clumsy and dangerous attempt to propagandize the Iraqi public. Ensuing media invective raised the specter of the Pentagon’s earlier abortive attempt to establish an “Office of Strategic Influence,” a centralized DoD attempt to mobilize information—both fact and propaganda—in support of U.S. war aims, at once both advocated as “strategic communications” and criticized as “perception management.”<sup>14</sup>

What is “perception management?” Though absent from the lexicon of “Operational Art,” the term exists in joint doctrine and, as this story suggests, impacts the operational level of war. Joint Pub 3-13 defines “perception management” as

Actions to convey and/or deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning . . . ultimately resulting in foreign behaviors and official actions favorable to the originator’s objectives. In various ways, perception management combines truth projection, operations security, cover and deception, and psychological operations.<sup>15</sup>

To what extent was MNF-I justified in the attempt to manage Iraqi perceptions? As DoD continues to investigate this case to determine the existence and extent of any wrongdoing, the episode raises a far more compelling question: can the United States win a war of ideas or persuade hearts and minds without addressing perception? How well are operational commanders prepared to wage non-kinetic war? In his “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” President Bush stated that “unlike past wars, victory in Iraq will not come in the form of an enemy’s surrender, or be signaled by a single particular event—there will be no Battleship Missouri . . .”<sup>16</sup> What does this mean for commanders trained in operational art to establish and link objectives with a view toward the surrender table? Today’s fight is different, but one thing

is clear. Responding to the critics, information warriors on the front lines in Iraq vigorously defended their efforts, insisting that “the information environment has become a battlefield in a very real way.”<sup>17</sup>

## **AN EVOLVING BATTLEFIELD**

There are but two powers in the world, the sword and the mind. In the long run, the sword is always beaten by the mind.

Napoleon

The operational commander has long endeavored to balance two powerful forces, the sword and the mind, to accomplish his objective. Recent experiences on the modern battlefield suggest this critical task is rapidly evolving. The “Information Revolution,” characterized by the instant, ubiquitous, and continuous stream of words and images from across the globe, has unleashed a powerful non-kinetic force and dimension on the modern battlefield—perception. U.S. operational commanders must remain masters of the sword, managing space, time, and force to dominate the battlefield. Increasingly, though, they must devote more attention to the mind—how U.S. actions are perceived at home and abroad. The “CNN factor” and “Al-Jazeera factor” have opened the battlefield to millions of perceptions, a force capable of influencing strategic intent and modifying operational objective. The 1991 “Highway of Death” in Kuwait, and the 1993 images of U.S. casualties in Somalia illustrate this modern phenomenon.

Naval War College Professor Milan Vego notes the increasing importance of perception in prosecuting operational warfare, a phenomenon he pegs to the 1990s, which correspondingly witnessed the rise of the 24-hour news cycle. He writes:

Public perception of an operation may matter more than the correlation of forces on the ground, as the examples of Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia show. In a media-intense environment, politicians and the public have become very unforgiving of even minor mistakes and transgressions; therefore even the smallest aspect of military operations must now be planned with sensitivity to the public perception of the situation.<sup>18</sup>

A decade later, Iraq's compelling imagery underscores the impact of perception at the operational level: the transition to Phase IV as Saddam's statue was torn from its pedestal; the pressure for a military response to charred American corpses hanging from a Fallujah bridge; Nicholas Berg's gruesome beheading on the internet, announcing a new enemy in Iraq—Musab al-Zarqawi; Abu Gharib's incendiary effect on a budding insurgency; the promise of operational progress and future transition signified by hopeful Iraqis extending proud purple fingers.

Perception matters. It resonates across all levels of war, defining, shaping, and influencing the environment in which today's operational commanders seek to connect ends, ways, and means in the asymmetric settings and counterinsurgency operations of the "Global War on Terror" (GWOT). Victory in this struggle, the 2005 *National Defense Strategy* asserts, "will come only when the ideological motivation for the terrorists' activities has been discredited and no longer has the power to motivate streams of individuals to risk and sacrifice their lives,"<sup>19</sup> an end state requiring U.S. forces to "help change Muslim misperceptions of the United States and the West."<sup>20</sup> Commenting on the importance of perception and its relation to force, Marine Corps War College Professor Joseph Strange, has suggested: "It is possible to defeat an enemy, destroy its industry, and occupy its land. But if the spirit of resistance burns in the hearts of its people, one cannot claim victory."<sup>21</sup>

The GWOT, a struggle poorly named, represents less a conflict against an old and proliferated tactic than a fundamental war of ideas waged largely through regional insurgencies. As our experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown, the battles persist long after despotic regimes are toppled through kinetic action. In its cogent 1940 "small wars" manual, the U.S. Marine Corps highlighted the inherently non-kinetic nature of insurgency:

The motive in small wars is not material destruction. It is usually a project dealing with social, economic, and political development of the people. It is of primary importance that the fullest benefit be derived from the psychological aspects of the situation.<sup>22</sup>

Commenting on his mission as Task Force Baghdad commander, General Chiarelli has written:

Kinetic operations would provide the definable short-term wins we are comfortable with as an Army but, ultimately, would be our undoing. In the best case, we could cause the insurgency to grow. In the worst case, although we would never lose a tactical or operational engagement, the migration of fence-sitters to the insurgent cause would be so pronounced the coalition loss in soldiers and support would reach unacceptable levels.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, victory in the GWOT will hinge on our ability to win this war of ideas, waged across marketplaces, airwaves, and fiber-optics, and decided in the cognitive battle space of the mind. In October 2005, General Abizaid offered his perspective on perception and its relevance in Iraq: “If people in the region view us as partners as opposed to being occupiers, we certainly will win this war.”<sup>24</sup> In his study, Joseph Nye asserts that “power always depends on the context in which the relationship exists.”<sup>25</sup> As General Abizaid’s insight suggests, the ability to bring preeminent American power to bear in Iraq and accomplish our mission there remains inextricably tied to indigenous perception of that power.

Our enemy in Iraq is a shrewd and proficient perception manager. Insurgents and terrorists, from Muqtada al-Sadr to Musab al-Zarqawi, continue to wage war in this ethereal but effective dimension. Recognizing their physical inferiority and capitalizing on the media’s lust for drama to fill an insatiable 24-hour news cycle, they expertly leverage the information dimension to transcend our physical strength and strike directly at the strategic center of gravity. Public support—in Iraq, the Middle East, the United States, and the watching world—represents that center of gravity.<sup>26</sup> The U.S. objective in Iraq is to establish a democratic government. In an ideological war waged by one democratic country to establish another, public support remains the “source of leverage—whose serious degradation . . . or destruction would have the most

decisive impact on the enemy's or one's own ability to accomplish a given military objective.”<sup>27</sup>

Returning from combat in Iraq, Marine Lieutenant General James Conway observed: “Our enemy knows that popular support is the center of gravity for any American government engaged in conflict, and he works to disassemble that support every day.”<sup>28</sup>

Public support is predicated on perception. By staging lethal violence for media coverage, the enemy in Iraq maximizes the efficacy of limited force to gain multiple effects. Scenes of carnage in Iraq have undermined U.S. public and Congressional support for the war. These scenes challenge U.S. power in the region, a David-and-Goliath message that resonates across an Arab population deeply suspicious of U.S. policy. Finally, the attacks demolish the perception of security, so essential to restoring stability to Iraqi society. This war for perception reflects a prescient 1989 analysis entitled “Fourth Generation Warfare,” which predicted:

Warfare [would] likely be widely dispersed and largely undefined; the distinction between war and peace will be blurred to the vanishing point. It will be nonlinear, possibly to the point of having no definable battlefields or fronts. The distinction between ‘civilian’ and ‘military’ may disappear. Actions will occur concurrently throughout all participants’ depth, including their society as a cultural, not just a physical entity. . . . Fourth generation adversaries will be adept at manipulating the media to alter domestic and world opinion to the point where skillful use of psychological operations will sometimes preclude the commitment of combat forces. A major target will be the enemy population’s support of its government and the war. Television news may become a more powerful operational weapon than armored divisions.<sup>29</sup>

The operational commander possesses a vital, but underdeveloped and widely misunderstood, weapon to meet and defeat the enemy on this vital front. Information Operations (IO), coordinated across the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war, will continue to emerge as an indispensable complement to the kinetic instruments of military power to meet twenty-first century requirements for smart power. Joint doctrine defines IO as the “actions taken to affect adversary information and information systems while defending one’s own information and information systems.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, this definition and current IO doctrine reflect an

inherent limitation in waging an effective war of ideas. Through its principal focus on a symmetric “adversary,” IO is largely confined to a supporting role for conventional force-on-force combat, offering little direction in crafting and projecting a compelling U.S. message to win hearts and minds in a post-conflict environment destabilized by regime change, chaos, and uncertainty.

OIF revealed this deficiency. In planning and execution, General Franks successfully incorporated IO in its traditional supporting role. In an operation termed “April Fool,” he sowed confusion and doubt into Saddam’s high command.<sup>31</sup> In the race to Baghdad, IO planners vectored nearly 500 fire missions to destroy the communication network, isolating Saddam from his troops and the Iraqi people.<sup>32</sup> In traditional leaflet drops, broadcasts, and—in a bow to the “Information Age”—e-mails and cell phone calls, U.S. planners targeted and eroded Iraqi forces’ morale.<sup>33</sup> When it came to the more difficult task of managing perceptions, however, Franks voiced common operational-level discomfort and anxiety with IO. He told Secretary Rumsfeld: “I don’t deal well with the media. . . . I need someone press-savvy to help me navigate the rapids.”<sup>34</sup> The DoD expert, duly provided, asked the general for guidance. “I don’t give a rat’s ass what you do with ‘em,” Franks replied, “just keep them out of my hair.”<sup>35</sup>

Since Saddam’s fall, the fight for hearts and minds suggests the need for a different IO approach within the U.S. military. Fighting a conventional adversary, information operations play a necessary supporting role, shaping the battle space and complementing kinetic action to target and destroy the enemy. Once physical objectives are secured—the capital seized, the army destroyed—the phase and objective change, and so does the relationship between the physical and information environments. In Phase IV Iraq, the U.S. objective shifted to establishing civil order and control. This objective hinged on perception since it required public complicity. In

this setting, the information environment becomes paramount, with the physical environment in a vital supporting role. In the aftermath of regime change, U.S. authorities needed to fill the political vacuum with a compelling and persuasive message of order and control, validated by security, to a watching and waiting Iraqi public. The widespread looting that occurred in the wake of Baghdad's fall offered ominous signs for a rejection of U.S. authority and fertile ground—when combined with social discord and political disillusionment—for insurgency.

In counterinsurgency operations waged for public support, IO must be truthful to preserve credibility, maintain authority, and be persuasive. Since World War II, the U.S. military has maintained a capacity to manage foreign perceptions, suffusing truth and falsehood in support of conventional operations. This capability, psychological operations (PSYOP), has been reorganized in recent years as a doctrinal pillar of IO. However, the counterinsurgency environment imposes a higher standard for IO, and cedes an asymmetric advantage to the enemy:

The insurgent, having no responsibility, is free to use every trick; . . . he can lie, cheat, exaggerate. He is not obliged to prove; he is judged by what he promises, not by what he does. Consequently, propaganda is a powerful weapon for him. . . . The counterinsurgent is tied to his responsibilities and to his past, and for him, facts speak louder than words. He is judged on what he does, not on what he says. If he lies, cheats, exaggerates, and does not prove, he may achieve some temporary success, but at the price of being discredited for good. And he cannot cheat much unless his political structures are monolithic, for the legitimate opposition in his own camp would soon disclose his every psychological maneuver.<sup>36</sup>

U.S. media reporting and debate over the MNF-I/Lincoln Group episode reveals U.S. political structures are far from monolithic. The incident also shows that U.S. forces must broaden and coordinate their IO approach to ensure important objectives—establishing democratic structures and countering enemy propaganda—are not working at cross purposes.

U.S. operational commanders, returning from the fight in Iraq, widely recognize the expanded role and increased utility of operational IO. They also admit its slow and ad hoc

implementation. Colonel Joe Anderson, USA, commanding a brigade during OIF I, stressed the importance of gathering and conveying accurate information to Iraqis, a culture that thrives on rumor and conspiracy. He described a vigorous information offensive that he improvised and implemented to meet a commander's need to inform, persuade, and control.<sup>37</sup> Two years after Colonel Anderson's return from Iraq, Lieutenant General James Mattis, USMC, redeployed from Iraq, insisted: "information operations [are] how you dry up the swamp that's festering this plague," elaborating that insurgents know they "cannot win in the political process so they must do terrorism....[which] is a critical vulnerability on the IO level if we will exploit it."<sup>38</sup> He ended, though, on a disturbing note, concluding "I'm not sure we've started yet."<sup>39</sup> The Lincoln Group episode indicates we have started, though our start has been a slow one owing to the complexity of this new arena. As Dr. Vego observes, "Information has always been a source of power, but the information age is making it increasingly a source of confusion. The greatest problem today is not the shortage of knowledge, but orientation."<sup>40</sup> This paper now turns to an analysis of the information battlefield—using the operational factors of space, time, and force—in order to offer operational commanders an initial orientation.

## **SPACE**

Information is terrain and someone will occupy it, either the adversary, a third party, or us.

"Perception Manager" John Rendon

Where is the fight waged for hearts and minds? In a proposed "National Information Strategy," IO theorists from the National Defense University described the emergence of a "global cognitive battle space," identifying television and the internet as "essential operational mediums" in which to wage the "war of ideas."<sup>41</sup> In an August 2003 article for the *Naval War College Review* entitled "Shift to a Global Perspective," former JCS Chairman General Richard



Myers urged military commanders to consider the impact of globally accessible information to their operations, stating, “how we perceive something determines our understanding of it and, by implication, our response to it.”<sup>42</sup> This simple observation identifies the critical terrain in the war of ideas. Commanders returning from Iraq emphasize a common and vital operating parameter, one which advertisers have long known: perception is reality.<sup>43</sup> The place where perceptions are made represents vital battle space in the war of ideas.

Television remains a powerful and unpredictable factor in the fight for perception. During the 2003 Baghdad advance, journalists, “embedded” with combat units and reporting the action in real-time, conveyed a perception of U.S. momentum and impending Iraqi defeat; this may have contributed, in part, to limited Iraqi resistance against the U.S. “thunder run.” During conventional operations, embedding offered a degree of control for commanders. It focused reporters’ attention on tactical drama while restricting their view from operational or strategic considerations.<sup>44</sup> Later, insurgents would reverse this advantage, using this thirst for drama to magnify tactical attacks in spite of U.S. operational and strategic progress in Iraq. In April 2004, the Marines curtailed their advance on Fallujah due to the presence of Al-Jazeera cameras on the battlefield. The potential impact of those images across the Arab world forced counterproductive operational restraint, allowing many insurgents to escape.<sup>45</sup> In retrospect, Marine Lieutenant General John Sattler remarked, “if you’re on your back in the IO war, you can throw punches all day long and they won’t even reach the opponent’s knee.”<sup>46</sup>

The war for perception is also raging in cyberspace. In December 2005, U.S. military commanders recorded an insurgent “publicity blitz,” noting 825 web postings, up from 145 the previous January.<sup>47</sup> The web became a particularly gruesome outlet in the perception war when Zarqawi posted footage depicting the beheading of U.S. citizen Nicholas Berg, purportedly in

retaliation for Abu Ghraib's images. One Arab newspaper characterized the act "not [as] an eye for an eye. It was a scene for a scene,"<sup>48</sup> intended to reach millions across the world. For computer users not logged on, insurgents have distributed CDs and DVDs. This material, enhanced with video, soundtracks, and professional editing offer alienated Iraqis an outlet for resistance, cognitive if not physical, providing them "a virtual jihadist experience."<sup>49</sup> It also provides insurgent groups with global reach, often running websites through U.S. servers, where money and recruits are solicited and acquired to fight against the coalition.

Managing perceptions must account for cultural perspective. "Fourth Generation Warfare" advocates suggest the non-kinetic impact the coalition could have made if it had established its headquarters at Abu Gharib and incarcerated prisoners in Saddam's palaces.<sup>50</sup> The coalition's high prioritization for securing Iraq's oil infrastructure, while civil needs for electricity, water, and sewage seemed to remain unaddressed created a flashpoint in the fight for perception that resonates across the Arab world to this day. A lack of cultural sensibility has minimized the effects of U.S. IO. For the heavily propagandized Iraqi public, the U.S. use of national TV, radio, and print media provided little sway. As one expert notes, "Islamic opinion is influenced more by what the U.S. does than anything it can say."<sup>51</sup> While today's battle space in Iraq is largely psychological, actions trump words in conveying the U.S. message.

## **TIME**

They [the insurgents] lie. A lie moves around the world at the speed of light while . . . truth is still trying to get its boots on.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

Perception is highly perishable. Consequently, the fight for perception is time-critical.

As Secretary Rumsfeld has observed,

Our country is waging a battle . . . in a media age that's unlike any warfighters have ever known. Think of it. This is the first war of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's the first war to be

conducted with talk radio, and 24-hour news, and bloggers, and e-mails, and digital cameras, and Sony video cams, and all of these things that bring so much information near instantaneously to people.<sup>52</sup>

On this unfamiliar fighting ground, Rumsfeld observed, “Speed . . . is the critical determinant. Less so, context.”<sup>53</sup> The fight for perception on the modern battlefield is, as Zawahri has articulated, quite literally, “a race” for hearts and minds. Built on the theories of Colonel John Boyd, USAF IO doctrine states as its goal “improving the commander’s capability to observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA Loop) faster and more effectively than an adversary . . .”<sup>54</sup> In conventional hostilities, the decision-cycle race is confined to the belligerents, sequencing and applying violence toward a capitulation of their enemy. In counterinsurgency operations, the belligerents are racing to frame their actions for the orientation and decision phases of a third party—the public—whose support will ultimately determine the outcome. In this race, speed is essential. Commenting on Zarqawi’s December 2005 media blitz, the senior U.S. intelligence officer in Iraq, Major General Richard Zahner, has said: “It is the centerpiece of their effort...[Zarqawi] has always been excellent at it. Lately, he’s been turning it faster.”<sup>55</sup>

The enormous size, unwieldy structure, and underdeveloped capacity of U.S. forces to wage this fight places the coalition at great disadvantage. The amount and overlap of U.S. organizations in the perception fight is staggering: the White House, State Department, and Pentagon have all created new offices for “strategic communications,” an emerging discipline defined as: “The synchronized coordination of statecraft, public affairs, public diplomacy, military IO, and other activities, reinforced by the political, economic, military, and other actions to advance U.S. foreign policy objectives.”<sup>56</sup> Within DoD, U.S. Strategic Command maintains the national IO mission, while U.S. Special Operations Command controls PSYOP, and U.S. Central Command maintains geographic responsibility for all operations in the Middle East. In

Iraq, the U.S. Embassy, MNF-I, and Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) represent three additional layers of responsibility for the U.S. message. The cumulative effect is a ponderous decision cycle in a new, unfamiliar, and vital mission area that constrains initiative and bold offensive action, a weakness our enemy—under no such constraints—exploits. “They’re able to turn within our turning circle,”<sup>57</sup> Rumsfeld admits. Without a more nimble posture and persuasive message, time is not on our side.

### **FORCE**

One may say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.

Clausewitz, *On War*

Among OIF forces, two groups wage the fight for perception, conveying our moral factors to the people of Iraq. The first group consists of the information professionals, a group historically divided into two incongruous camps: IO and public affairs (PA). In a previous century, the dividing line was clear. The U.S. Gillett Amendment (1917), Smith-Mundt Act (1948), Foreign Relations Act (1972) and Zorinsky Amendment prohibited propagandizing the American public, while PSYOP professionals and information warriors blended truth and deception for foreign audiences in the pursuit of military objectives.<sup>58</sup> The “Information Age”—characterized by the worldwide web and 24-hour global media—has demolished that clean line.

“If you say anything,” Rumsfeld acknowledges,

You’re talking to multiple audiences . . . simultaneously everything I say . . . is going to people in DoD; . . . it’s going to our friends and allies around the world; it’s going to our enemies; it’s going to other governments . . . and we’re not organized and trained to handle it in a particularly brilliant fashion.<sup>59</sup>

The danger is information fratricide, where separate U.S. information efforts conflict with each other, detracting from overall operational intent and objective. Nowhere has the blurring of this anachronistic line been brought into sharper focus than the information battlefield in Iraq. In

the summer of 2004, MNF-I commander, General George Casey, seeking to mitigate information fratricide, directed the operational integration of PA and IO into a single “strategic communications office,”<sup>60</sup> to collective howls on all sides. In response, (then CJCS) General Myers, issued a stern warning against operationally blurring the line between these distinct military functions:

Effective planning and execution of PA operations and IO are critical to accomplishing the commander’s mission. PA’s principal focus is to inform the American public *and international audiences* [emphasis added] . . . IO, on the other hand, serves, in part, to influence *foreign adversary audiences* [emphasis added] using PSYOP capabilities. While audiences and intent differ, both PA and IO ultimately support the dissemination of information . . . [but as] the efforts differ with respect to audience, scope and intent . . . [they] must remain separate. Commanders must ensure appropriate coordination and synchronization between PA and IO efforts.<sup>61</sup>

While intent may differ, the modern global information environment has demolished the firewall between domestic and foreign audiences. In the global communications age, international media outlets chase the scoop around the world, feeding from outlets that value speed over national boundaries, a distinction made less relevant by the “worldwide web” and widespread international travel. As one expert observes, in today’s global communication environment, “time zones [are] more important than borders.”<sup>62</sup>

This leaves the operational commander with a difficult challenge: to preserve credibility with the American people and international allies while fighting the information war against skillful “Fourth Generation” adversaries. Objective holds the key. At the operational level of war, the commander is responsible to “link tactics and strategy by establishing operational objectives to accomplish the strategic objectives.”<sup>63</sup> In Iraq, the president has articulated the following strategic objective:

Widespread understanding in Iraq, the Arab world, and international arena of Iraq’s successes in building democracy, prosperity, and security. . . . A professional and informative

Iraqi news media has taken root . . . we are working to promote civic understanding and enable Iraq's public and private media institutions to flower.”<sup>64</sup>

Meeting this objective requires public support and credibility. Public deception breeds resentment and fuels distrust. Deceptive information operations that cannot be held to public scrutiny—a tenet of democracy—are inadvisable in counterinsurgency operations waged to win hearts and minds.

U.S. forces in daily contact with Iraqis represent the second group fighting the war for perception. As Colonel Anderson described, the weapons in this war are decidedly non-kinetic. Electricity, schools, water, clinics, and information fill a potent arsenal in this fight. In an environment of uncertainty, targeted information is power. Conditioned by decades of Saddam's propaganda, the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) attempts to wield this power through centralized mass media messages lacked credibility. “All politics is local,” Colonel Anderson recalled, as he waged an information war against insurgent disinformation by “flooding the market” on local television, AM/FM radio, polls, and call-in shows. Across these media, he and his staff officers provided information on health care, education, political parties, project bids, even the role of women.<sup>65</sup> Open, constant, honest communication, in tandem with steady feedback and responsiveness, are the new tactics U.S. forces must master on today's battlefields.

The fight for perception in the media age has also introduced a new rank to the modern battlefield: the “strategic corporal.”<sup>66</sup> The American soldier with a camera in his face carries strategic implications around the world, a condition the operational commander must consider. Reporters will continue to gravitate to soldiers because they lend a battlefield authenticity to the reporting that professional information officers, seen as mouthpieces, do not. “Joe...shoots from the hip and speaks from the heart,”<sup>67</sup> possessing credibility with a viewing public that trusts information it considers unvarnished, without the “spin” of professional information officers.

“Joe’s” sincerity, seasoned with basic IO familiarity training and aided by PSYOP and Civil Affairs practitioners, could be a powerful weapon in the fight for perception. The alternative is misguided “hip-shooting” with fallout for commanders and IO officers to rectify after the fact.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

On today’s battlefields, combatant and joint force commanders must reorient their staffs and planning to recognize that major combat operations represent merely the opening phase in a patient and protracted struggle, requiring a skillful balancing of kinetic and non-kinetic force. Combatant commands should seek indigenous expertise to examine the cultural assumptions that underlie current contingency plans, vetting the cultural perspectives and perceptions those assumptions make. Plans developed in a cultural vacuum are inherently flawed. Combatant commanders should create an IO Task Force that combines indigenous expertise with applicable U.S. military skill sets—IO, PSYOP, intelligence, public affairs, and civil affairs—to reexamine contingency planning. War gaming must consider the effects of kinetic and non-kinetic operations on indigenous populations, often split along religious, tribal, or ethnic fault lines, not the widespread artificiality of third-world political borders.

Commanders must immediately begin to plan for “Stability and Support Operations,” (SASO), no longer an afterthought or ancillary operation, but—in accordance with DoD Directive 3000.05—a mission set “comparable to combat operations.”<sup>68</sup> These tasks, building infrastructure, implementing the rule of law, and building democratic institutions, represent a true revolution in military affairs, requiring the U.S. military to shift resources and efforts from an exclusive focus on conventional combat. Nevertheless, these efforts comprise the critical ways and means to deprive Islamists the leverage they enjoy from failing states, hostile populations, and widespread, voraciously fed misperceptions about the West.

Combatant and joint force commanders must conduct early and aggressive media outreach, while accepting that media content is largely beyond their control. Private and commercial interests will continue to fuel the war for perception waged on television and the internet. The best a commander can hope for—as he pursues the perceptions critical to his objective—is for the media to seek his side of the story before filing theirs. The willingness of correspondents to seek a balanced perspective derives in part from the access, effort, candor, and personal relationships a U.S. commander provides. In the media battle space, a proactive relationship can be a strategic force multiplier. With this asset, the operational commander should “flood the market” at his level with positive stories about joint force and coalition efforts to affect global perceptions. The media will continue to pursue their own agenda, seeking dramatic scenes of destruction to fill the 24-hour news cycle, but editorial decisions may occasionally improve if there is an abundance of stories from which to choose. Positive developments, unexploited for their information value, are bullets wasted in this fight.

To increase our agility in the fight for perception, joint force commanders should extend the concept of centralized planning and decentralized execution to non-kinetic operations. In 2003, Secretary Rumsfeld signed the *Information Operations Roadmap*, elevating IO to a “core military competency,” requiring full integration into military planning and implementation in supporting and supported operations.<sup>69</sup> Despite the promotion, U.S. IO remains understaffed and underdeveloped. Operational commanders should maximize the value of limited IO professionals by integrating them into the J-2 (Intelligence), J-3 (Operations), and J-5 (Plans) directorates to infuse joint force operations and plans with non-kinetic perspective. These officers, coordinating their efforts with the IO Task Force and Joint Interagency Coordination Group (JIACG), could serve three functions: de-conflict and balance kinetic and non-kinetic



operations; build and expand interagency coordination throughout the combatant and joint force command; and develop an integrated and compelling U.S. message with non-military government agencies skilled in public diplomacy and strategic communication.

Once developed, these themes should be pushed to the field for local—not mass—distribution. Local commanders, possessing credibility and conducting daily interaction with indigenous communities, could refine the themes, tailoring them according to local cultural, tribal, and religious sensitivities. To assist with this effort, operational commanders should provide subordinate commanders with organic IO officers and the resources and latitude to identify, vet, and retain indigenous expertise to ensure cultural traction. The final critical component is to solicit regional feedback, through community leaders, polling, questionnaires, and suggestion boxes, to modify these themes as necessary, coordinating their operational effectiveness as a commander’s critical information requirement.

Finally, combatant and joint force commanders must consider more than the kinetic training of their forces. As General Chiarelli notes: “Cultural awareness and an empathetic understanding of the impact of Western actions on a Middle East society were constantly at the forefront of all operational considerations, regardless of the complexity.”<sup>70</sup> As operational orders are drafted and forces assembled, modern operational leadership requires that non-kinetic training—in historical background, cultural awareness, and rules of engagement for civilian interaction—be provided for joint forces expected to make contact with host nation populations. No responsible commander would send soldiers into combat without range firing their weapons. In the fight for hearts and minds, operational commanders must ensure that “strategic corporals” are prepared to wade into foreign populations under dangerous circumstances with cameras poised from around the world to capture U.S. policy in action.

## CONCLUSION

War remains an “act of primordial violence.”<sup>71</sup> As such, its practice will always require kinetic skill, harnessing violence to achieve physical objectives and defeat the enemy. At the same time, as long as war is undertaken by democracies on behalf of people with a right to know in an age dominated by information, cameras and journalists will record and frame the use of violence in pursuit of strategic national objectives. How that violence is framed, and the perceptions it creates at home and around the world, will continue to impact the operational relationship of ends and means on the battlefield. In view of this reality, managing perception is not improper; it is imperative in modern war. A condition for long-term victory in the GWOT will be achieved when U.S. forces can deliver a compelling message with the same force and precision as they deliver ordnance. Information is a critical arrow in the modern quiver. In counterinsurgency operations, its measure of effectiveness—harder to discern, but no less important—is the absence of physical destruction perpetrated by insurgents and supported, tacitly or willfully, by a disaffected population. On today’s battlefield, operational commanders must understand, develop and refine non-kinetic capabilities, attuned to perception, in order to accomplish twenty-first century counterinsurgency missions.

The GWOT, with its central front in Iraq, represents a global counterinsurgency operation waged to persuade global hearts and minds that Western ideology is not a threat, and that self-determination offers a brighter future than Islamist extremism. In this effort, credibility is crucial. In conventional military operations against hostile regimes and their armed forces, deceptive PSYOP is useful and maintains, as General Eisenhower noted, “a place of dignity in our military arsenal.”<sup>72</sup> Yet, today in Iraq, and on future counterinsurgency fronts, official deception aimed at the public threatens our credibility, depleting a critical strength. In an age of

instant and worldwide communication, keeping secrets has become increasingly difficult. In the war we are waging to build democratic nations—an effort under global scrutiny—truth is the most effective policy. Initiatives that incorporate deception must be considered with utmost discretion by senior commanders to balance potential short-term gains against the risk of disclosure and broader alienation of the very hearts and minds we spend our precious blood and treasure to persuade.

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